

# A B R I E F B I O G R A P H I C A L   S K E T C H

OF

## The Hon. Robert Charles Wilkins.

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(*Written for the Hastings Chronicle.*)

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### 25th March, 1866.

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A pioneer in the early settlement of the Bay of Quinte section of the country has passed away. At the Carrying Place, on the 28th of March, the Hon. ROBERT CHARLES WILKINS, in the 84th year of his age, from an affliction which his years could no longer support, yielded up the spirit which God had given him. Born in 1782, in the city of New York (?) then yet held by the British forces, who had been employed in the attempt to suppress the American rebellion, the life of the subject of this notice, running parallel as it does with the history of Upper Canada, possesses many points of interest. He was the son of Robert Wilkins, of whose demise we find the following notice in the *Kingston Chronicle*;—

“At the Carrying Place, 27th February, 1836, Robert Wilkins Esquire, in the 94th year of his age. He entered the Army at the early age of 17, in the 17th Light Dragoons, then commanded by the late Colonel Hale. Soon after he joined the Regiment it was ordered to Scotland. There it did not remain long: the ‘Whiteboy’ conspiracy had been formed in Ireland. From Ireland he sailed with the same distinguished Regiment for the North American Colonies, then raising the standard of revolt,—landed at Boston, and a few days after bore a conspicuous part in the battle of Bunker’s Hill, on which occasion he had two horses shot under him. He was present at most of the

engagements in the Northern Colonies. At the battle of White Plains he was one of the forlorn hope, where he received a severe contusion on the breast, and lost the hump of his right hand. After recovering from his wounds he retired from the Army, and entered into mercantile pursuits in the city of New York. There he carried on a prosperous business until peace was concluded; but when that city was evacuated by the British troops (in 1783.) he was too strongly attached to his King to remain behind. He accompanied them to Shelburne, Nova Scotia. In the improvements of that luckless place he expended a large sum of money, but finding that the place would not succeed, he left it, and in 1789 returned to his native country, from which, three years after, he was induced to follow Governor Simcoe to this Colony, just after it had received its Constitution, and became a distinct Government. From that time he remained in Upper Canada and most of the time at this place. Of christian doctrine and christian duty he had a much deeper sense than was obvious to occasional visitors. While he kept house, his hospitality was proverbial, and never under his roof was the poor refused food or shelter. His remains were followed to the church, and thence to the house appointed for all living by not less than 300 of his friends and neighbors,—a proof of the estimation in which he was held by those to whom he was best known.”

The characteristics of the father were in a remarkable degree transmitted to the son. Possessing energy, intelligence, and hospitality, he early commenced the practice of those virtues which were so natural to him, and which distinguished him throughout life. The succeeding incidents are extracted from a paper placed in the hands of the writer of this notice, and were delivered to an intimate friend of the deceased:—

“The following statement of facts regarding my life, I leave to gratify the oft-expressed wishes of

my family and friends, and not from any vain-glorious feeling on my own part. With me all such vanities have long since passed away. My father was an Englishman by birth and feeling, and a freeman of the borough of Leicester. I accompanied my father, Captain Robert Wilkins, from England to this country, about 1792. I was then nine years of age.

\* \* \* My father readily obtained a grant of land on his arrival in this colony, for himself and his children; for himself as Captain he drew 3,000 acres of valuable lands, and for each of his children who were of age, 600 acres. I was ten years old when my father arrived at Kingston, and from that time to the present my home has been upon the margin of the Bay of Quinte. For the principal part of my education I am indebted to the venerable Archdeacon Stuart, who was then a young man preparing for orders. For this good and amiable man I have always entertained a sincere regard; there ever after existed between us a warm friendship.

Early in life I entered in business at the head of the Bay of Quinte on the Carrying Place, where I have resided ever since. In 1804 I united fortunes to that of Mary Smith, fourth daughter of the late Charles Smith, of Port Hope, with whom I spent many happy years. She was removed from me on 17th April. 1847.

In 1808 Mr. Wilkins entered into a large Lumber business, which he prosecuted successfully till 1816, when he formed a partnership with the late Joseph Shuter, as general Importers at the city of Montreal. They did an extensive and prosperous business. The memorandum continues:—"On the breaking out of the war of 1812. I was appointed Captain of a flank Company, and in that year was on duty with my

company in Kingston until I was appointed a Commissary agent at the Carrying Place. This appointment, and its location here, were in consequence of the United States having obtained control of Lake Ontario. The object of this office was to obtain supplies for the army, and to secure safe transportation of troops and stores from the head of the Bay of Quinte. To enable me to carry these objects to a successful issue, it was ordered by General Drummond that all Magistrates and Colonels of Militia were to obey my orders and carry out my requisitions when required for the public service. In that position I continued to the end of the war, assisted by a most efficient officer, John McCuaig, of the Commissary department."

\* \* \* \* \* An idea of the services required of him at this period may be formed, when it is known that at times he was called upon to serve out 6000 rations per day, and to provide transport for large numbers of prisoners and troops going in opposite directions. The requisitions were made upon him with only a few hours' notice, and under the most urgent circumstances. On many occasions he obtained through local knowledge and influence, the provisions and means of conveyance, declared by the Commissariat as unattainable; thus contributing in an important degree to the success of the various enterprises of that eventful period. The British troops were either hastening to the Western frontier, by forced marches, or prisoners of war were being conveyed to Quebec for safe keeping. Gen. Hull's army, captured at the surrender of Detroit, it is said passed over the Carrying Place on its way to the transport ships and hulks, then used as prisons, in Quebec harbor.

At the close of the war Mr. Wilkins received from the head of the Commissary department the most sat-

isfactory approval of the manner in which the accounts had been kept, and for the faithful discharge of his many important duties.

Another instance of the various service he was called upon to render, was in providing for the conveyance in batteaux down the Bay of Quinte, of the prisoners taken at Queenston Heights. On this occasion, a person who has since become conspicuous from the exalted positions he has lately occupied, was for several days Mr. Wilkins' guest. Gen'l Scott, Commander-in-chief of the U. S. army, then a Colonel in the American service, was among the prisoners taken at the battle of Queenston Heights. In subsequent years, when the subject was mentioned to General Scott, he made many kind enquiries respecting his host on that occasion,

Again, in 1837, at the breaking out of the rebellion, Mr. Wilkins was called upon by the Government of that day. As Colonel of the 2d Prince Edward Regt. of Militia, he was appointed by Sir F. B. Head to command the whole Militia of that District, and in that capacity called out, as they were required, volunteer companies for active service. Of these volunteer companies there were either 5 or 6. Mr. Wilkins, in referring to this duty says, "the difficulty we had was not to obtain men, but to deal with the numbers who offered their services, and whom we were obliged to refuse. The appearance and conduct of these men were such as to elicit from the Colonel in command (Mr. Wilkins' superior officer) "the strongest expressions of approval in both respects,"

In the rebellion of 1837, as in the war of 1812, not the least arduous and responsible of Mr. Wilkins' many duties, were the magisterial duties he was frequently called upon to discharge.

At the close of the Rebellion, Mr. Wilkins was invited to a public dinner by the officers of the three Militia regiments under his command, and many were the expressions of confidence and readiness to serve under him again, should the times call them forth. The interval of peace from 1812 to 1837 had not abated his capacity, or his willingness to discharge his duty. With most of the old settlers of the Province, especially the survivors of the war of 1812, the part they took in the defence of the country is now referred to with commendable pride. From those who have since conferred dignity and lustre upon the administration of justice in this Province, as well as to many who have arrived at less conspicuous positions in other callings, the stirring events of 1812 and the subsequent years of the war, are subjects of congratulation; and well it may be, for it is mainly owing to their patriotism that to-day we enjoy British institutions.

It may be stated as a matter of curiosity, that Mr. Wilkins' Militia commission dates from 1795; he was then an Ensign. This is said to be the oldest commission in the Province held at this period by a survivor.

In 1840 Mr Wilkins was called to the Legislative Council, by Lieutenant Governor Sir George Arthur, and had before been recommended by Sir Francis B. Head. Among the measures of a local nature which Mr. Wilkins advocated in the Legislature, were the construction of the Trent and Murray Canals. With the latter, now about to be revived in connection with the *Mineral Districts Railway*, his name is particularly identified. On many occasions he urged it upon the Government and the military authorities of the day, but as the importance of the work from a commercial point of view did not apparently warrant

the Government in applying the appropriation held in trust for that purpose, and as the long continued peace did not force it upon the military authorities in England, it was never undertaken. The following extract from the Report of the Trade and Commerce of Montreal for 1865, is an evidence of Mr. Wilkins' advanced views on this subject :

"When it is remembered that the stretch between Presque Isle Harbor and Kingston is the most hazardous on Lake Ontario, the advantages to be derived from such a cut-off will be evident, especially in the Fall, when stormy weather is most prevalent. Had that little canal existed last year, a number of marine disasters might have been avoided. Any one who examines the map may see at once how important the Bay of Quinte would thus become in the event of hostilities on the Lake."

At the Union of the Provinces, of which he was an opponent, in common with most of the Conservative party of that day, he declined to accept a seat in the united Legislative Council, though invited to do so by Sir Charles Bagot, who addressed him the following letter upon the subject:—

"Quebec, July 18th. 1842."

"SIR.—As the time is now approaching at which the Provincial Parliament will meet for the despatch of business, and as previous to their meeting it will be necessary that an addition should be made to the Legislative Council, I take this opportunity of informing you that I shall have much pleasure in submitting your name to Her Majesty for an appointment to that Body, should you be willing to accept it.

In making this offer, however, I am bound to stipulate that if, as I hope, you accept it, you will give a regular attendance to the duties which the appointment will entail upon you, and will not allow it to lapse into a mere honorary distinction.

I have great pleasure in this occasion of testifying my sense of your character and standing in this Province.

Your obedient and faithful servant,

CHARLES BAGOT.

The Hon'ble R. C. Wilkins."

It is understood that the reason assigned by Mr. Wilkins for declining this offer was, that his private business required his attention; but friends who knew



him intimately state that his refusal arose from other motives. Having opposed the Union, he did not care to accept an appointment under it.— The position of a Legislative Councillor was not a position which Mr. Wilkins sought for advancement. It would add neither dignity to his position in the Province, or honor to his well established reputation. He was wealthy and had a recognized position, and nature had made him a gentleman. That a man of Mr. Wilkins' characteristics should have been popular is no wonder to those who knew him; but that he retained the esteem of the first men of the Province to his latest days, and for years after he had ceased to take an active part in public affairs, is perhaps attributable to the sterling qualities of his character, which were remembered by all who had ever known him. His remains were followed to the grave by a large concourse of friends, many of whom had travelled long distances to pay the last tribute of respect to one who during life they had regarded as one of nature's nobility. With his former friends and associates in life, they laid his remains in their midst, in the old grave yard at the Carrying Place.

On a subsequent occasion an interesting and affecting funeral sermon was preached by the Rev. John Grier, in memory of the deceased, at his usual place of worship at the Carrying Place. The Rev. gentleman, who so appropriately performed this last act of christian duty and friendship for the deceased, testified to his many christian virtues, and estimable qualities as a member of society, as well as to the principal incidents of his life as above narrated, through an intimate friendship extending over 44 years.